



Opening Statement

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**Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Peter T. King (R-NY)
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
Committee on Homeland Security**

“Assessing Terrorism in the Caucasus and the Threat to the Homeland”

Remarks as Prepared

The Caucasus are a volatile region home to several extremist networks that are aligning themselves with al Qaeda's global jihadist movement, and spreading out to join conflicts outside their traditional homeland. Most alarmingly as we saw with the Boston Bombers, this conflict has inspired violent extremism around the world, including the U.S. Homeland.

Sadly, we approach the one-year anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings that were at least partly inspired by the insurgency in the Caucasus that caused three deaths and more than 200 serious injuries.

Militants from the region have also reportedly fought in the Balkans, attacked U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and have taken leadership positions with terrorist organizations in Syria, such as al-Nusra front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This hearing will explore the threat that these groups pose both inside and outside the region, as well as examine the potential threat these networks may eventually pose to United States interests.

While al Qaeda senior leadership is weakened, its brand and ideology is thriving and spreading. The Arab Spring, US troop withdrawals in Iraq and Afghanistan and the civil war in Syria have breathed new life into al Qaeda. Today we see elements of al Qaeda operating in 16 countries, new jihadist media publications that leverage the latest social media technology to reach new audiences inspiring violence around the globe, and a growing army of jihadists gaining battlefield experience in the Syrian conflict.

Instability in the ethnically-diverse Caucasus region has been an ongoing problem for centuries: a simmering cauldron mostly contained within the borders of the Russian Federation. In recent years the Russian government's tactics have transformed the battle from a nationalist fight, with anti-Russian roots to a struggle based on Islamist ideology. This conflict is now showing signs of boiling over into

unstable havens of terrorist activity in other parts of the world, and is threatening Europe and potentially the Homeland.

We also have to examine recent actions by Russia to annex Crimea, part of the sovereign nation of Ukraine. How will these actions and whatever additional hostile actions Russia may take in the region impact intent of the Caucasus Emirate?

Chechens trained with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks, and Osama bin Laden's network supplied fighters and funds to them during the second Chechen war.¹ A Chechen now leads the ISIS forces in northern Syria and has masterminded a series of strategic defeats of Assad's troops.²

While the current threat to Homeland from the Caucasus' today appears minor, we must remember that we have made the mistake of underestimating the threat from terrorists in places like Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen before. The Obama Administration designated the now deceased leader of the Caucasus Emirate, Doku Umarov, as a global terrorist in 2010 and the United Nations Security Council al Qaeda Sanctions Committee has both Umarov and the Caucasus Emirate on its list of terrorists.

As this Subcommittee has stressed time and again, global terrorism does not require regiments of hardened soldiers with sophisticated weapons to have a lasting impact on society. Rather, a handful of committed murderers using household pressure cookers, or hijacking commercial airplanes can fundamentally change the course of history if they are disciplined and able to successfully conduct just one or two dramatic acts of violence. Al Qaeda is an opportunistic ideological movement that thrives in ungoverned spaces such as the Caucasus.

Fifteen years ago, most experts would not have forecasted an attack on the Homeland to originate from Nigeria, Pakistan or Yemen, but this Committee's mandate is to examine emerging threats to homeland security and I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses regarding the state of terrorist groups in the Caucasus, and the export of jihadists from the region to Syria and other safe havens of terrorist activity that threaten the U.S. and the West.

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¹ Zachary Laub, "Instability in Russia's North Caucasus Region" Council on Foreign Relations, February 6, 2014, available at: <http://www.cfr.org/russian-federation/instability-russias-north-caucasus-region/p9021>

² Alan Cullison, "Meet the Rebel Commander in Syria that Assad, Russia and the U.S. All Fear", Wall Street Journal, November 19, 2013, available at: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303309504579181962177007316>